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ABSTRACT

This is the final report from a seminar organized to provide a forum for information specialists and planners, from both developing and developed countries, to exchange experiences on major issues and problems involved in the formulation of national information policies and plans and their implementation. A primary concern was to examine the proposals contained in the working document (PGI-84/IPP/DUB.3), which was a consolidation of proposals and guidelines presented in various Unesco/PGI (General Information Programme) documents on information policy and planning. This six-part document comprises: (1) Introduction (for whom the guidelines are intended, type of guidelines required, and how useful previous guidelines have been); (2) The Scope of National Information Policy; (3) Means and Methods for Meeting Information Requirements; (4) Generating, Collecting, and Disseminating Information; (5) Statement of Basic Policy and Policy-Making Procedures; and (6) Implementing Information Policy. A list of seminar participants, consultants, and observers is included. (THC)

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UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC
AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR ON NATIONAL INFORMATION POLICY AND PLANNING

(Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia, 25-29 June 1984)

organized by Unesco/PGI in collaboration with the
Yugoslav National Commission for Unesco and the
International Referral Centre for Information
Handling Equipment (IRCIHE)

FINAL REPORT

GENERAL INFORMATION PROGRAMME AND UNISIST

IR051086

(PGI-85/WS/8)

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CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION	1
THE SCOPE OF NATIONAL INFORMATION POLICY	3
MEANS AND METHODS FOR MEETING INFORMATION REQUIREMENTS	3
GENERATING, COLLECTING AND DISSEMINATING INFORMATION	4
STATEMENT OF BASIC POLICY AND POLICY-MAKING PROCEDURES	6
IMPLEMENTING INFORMATION POLICY	7
LIST OF PARTICIPANTS	9

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The International Seminar on National Information Policy and Planning was organized to provide a forum for information specialists and planners, from both developing and developed countries, to exchange experiences on major issues and problems involved in the formulation of national information policies and plans and their implementation. A primary concern was to examine critically the proposals contained in the working document (PGI-84/IPP/DUB.3) which was a consolidation of proposals and guidelines presented in various Unesco/PGI documents on information policy and planning. The views expressed by participants, together with their recommendations, would provide material for enriching and improving upon the proposals and guidelines in the working document so that it could be finalized for publication. The conceptual framework of the document had been provided by Major Programme VII of Unesco, namely, "Information Systems and Access to Knowledge".

For whom are the guidelines intended?

2. The guidelines are intended for use by information (or information-related) planners as well as for information specialists concerned with the implementation of national information policies and plans. They might be useful to middle-level decision-makers in government (insofar as it is possible to draft them on to planning committees) or to non-governmental bodies engaged in elaborating national information policies and plans for the attention and final endorsement of governments.

3. Participants agreed that, in general, as far as government decision-makers or "politicians" were concerned, the imperative need was to find how best one could convince them of the importance of information (i.e. to convince them that information was an indispensable and basic resource for effective development planning) and to win them over to recognizing the need for incorporating information plans into national development plans. It was suggested, in this connection, that the implications for national development policies and plans of recent advances in information and communication technology, particularly in the field of microcomputers and their application, provided an opportunity for presenting a powerful case as to the imperative need for formulating national information policies and plans.

4. It was pointed out that even where the importance of information services was appreciated by high-level decision-makers, the need for a coherent and systematic national information policy and plan might not be fully grasped. In the absence of information policies and plans (incorporated into, or closely geared to, development plans) the utilization of relevant information might be uncoordinated and unsystematic with the result that decision-making tended to be *ad hoc* and ineffective because it was not backed by all the relevant information that could have been mustered. Hence the importance of general guidelines which would enable the formulation of information policies, plans and strategies.

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Type of guidelines required

5. Participants agreed that owing to the diversity of socio-economic circumstances of various countries the guidelines should be relatively general and adaptable for use at different levels of economic and social development and in various cultural contexts.

6. It was also important that the mode of presentation of the guidelines be sufficiently simple (without necessarily being too simplified with loss of content) so that they could be readily followed by as many people as possible who might be involved in one way or another with information planning or in its implementation.

7. Owing to the rapidly changing information situation, brought about principally by advances in information and communications technology, and also, to some extent, by rapid changes in the economic fortunes of many countries - not necessarily for the better - it was important that information policies and strategies be periodically reviewed for such modifications as might be necessary in the light of changing conditions. It also followed that no one set of guidelines could be prepared for all time. The guidelines would have to be modified in course of time to reflect changing conditions. The guidelines should, in this connection, make proposals for alternative approaches or options where relevant.

8. For effectiveness the guidelines would have to be backed by case studies of experiences of countries which had been successful in organizing national information services that answered effectively to national development goals. (It was agreed that the case studies should include examples of pit-falls that should be avoided). Several participants recounted their experiences of policy making and planning at the meeting. These experiences proved very relevant to the proposals in the working document and strengthened the case for publishing case studies which would, as it were, give "flesh" to the guidelines.

9. Participants further agreed that it would be desirable for Unesco/PGI to undertake studies in certain key areas in order to obtain pertinent information, currently lacking, which would be of value to planners, e.g. comparative analyses of the proportion of the total national budget devoted to the provision of information services and its sectoral breakdown.

How useful have been previous guidelines?

10. The discussion showed that some developed countries had not made explicit use of PGI/UNISIST guidelines and principles in elaborating their national information policies and plans. On the other hand, several developing countries had found UNISIST principles relevant and useful.

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II. THE SCOPE OF NATIONAL INFORMATION POLICY

Identification of information requirements

11. In the discussion of this subject, the following views were expressed:

(i) It is impossible to meet all the information requirements that can be identified in society: one must necessarily be selective and have orders of priority that are relevant to national development goals, apart from identifiying the level of service that has to be provided.

(ii) Assessment of information needs should encompass the needs of a wide spectrum of society - from the most sophisticated professional to the general reader who has important tasks to perform in a particular sector, as well as the illiterate who may have something to contribute and can be helped by relevant information. This means that there should be intermediaries (or extension personnel) who can interpret highly technical material into a form assimilable by the general user who might need such information. There should also be mass communication specialists who can present relevant information by means of audio-visual tools.

(iii) There should be a deliberate policy of creating information-mindedness and of promoting community participation.

(iv) Identification of information requirements requires user-education. Users have to be made familiar with what existing systems can offer.

(v) It is not necessary to wait for the completion of a perfect national plan before initiating action. A variety of important operations can be undertaken even in the absence of a plan. People have to be encouraged to do something once what is undertaken is known to be worthwhile, either by way of laying the basis of an infrastructure for information services or of meeting certain important information demands. In this connection, the experiences of other countries can be drawn upon. Doing something is better than doing nothing.

III. MEANS AND METHODS FOR MEETING INFORMATION REQUIREMENTS

The advent of the micro-computer

12. The role of new information technologies, with special emphasis on computers, in the provision of information services, was intensively discussed. It was generally agreed that computerization provided a powerful tool for satisfying information demands. Compared with other methods, and in relation to the needs of a wide category of users, the computer enabled one to accomplish a great deal more than was possible with traditional methods. Computers could handle an exceptionally large volume and range of information so that the demands of a wide range of workers in varied geographical locations

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could be met in a very short time. However, the dangers of considering computer acquisition as an end in itself or a panacea to all problems of information were also emphasized. The computer, it was agreed, should normally be used at the appropriate stage and at the appropriate time lest it become a master rather than a tool. This was something requiring sound expert judgement.

13. The advent of the micro-computer was unanimously recognized as a revolutionary development with far-reaching implications for information planning. Micro-computers, it was agreed, had the important features of modularity, on the one hand, and versatility, on the other. Micro-computers could readily interface with intermediate systems. Thus they could be linked with local, sub-regional and regional networks. They had made man-machine interface a reality. They were facilitating computer-aided instruction. Attention was drawn to the work being done by Unesco/PGI in the development of portable software packages.

14. Following the foregoing discussion and, particularly with reference to some of the new developments in micro-computer application which were not previously known to some of the participants, it was suggested that Unesco/PGI should endeavour to draw the attention of information planners of member countries to important developments in computer application which were vitally relevant to their work or else to draw attention to sources where such information could be obtained.

15. It was further agreed that every effort should be made to promote computer literacy.

IV. GENERATING, COLLECTING AND DISSEMINATING INFORMATION

16. In considering the generation of information, participants thought it essential to bear in mind that information was generated not only by government and public institutions but also by the private sector. It was often not possible to deliver information free-of-charge. However, experience had shown that where user-demands could be adequately and readily met, users were prepared to pay reasonable fees, and, the more so, if they realized that the charges could be used to improve the quality of service offered. User-consultation, in this connection, through questionnaires and meetings, was considered useful.

17. One participant suggested that an effective method of generating important information relevant to development planning was to add a very small sum to the cost of every project of importance so that, on the completion of each project, a brief write-up on it was provided. This write-up would include any problem encountered and an evaluation of the results achieved. The information thus obtained should be fed into the data bank of a central focal point.

18. One participant observed that it was important not to overstress the acquisition of the full text of every document of importance and relevance. So long as the relevant documents were available and readily accessible locally, the acquisition of a good abstract might suffice.

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19. Participants agreed that considerable information existed in oral tradition so that it was possible to make a misplaced assessment of recorded information vis-a-vis unrecorded information. Thus, for instance, important oral traditional information existed in such fields as history, folklore and herbal medicine. It should be part of the national information policy to collect, evaluate and store such information for potential users. The collection of such information might be undertaken through interviews using tape-recorders.Suitably briefed students from schools and colleges could be enlisted for this type of project. Participants agreed that generation of information from traditional sources was one way of securing community participation.

20. Participants agreed that it was important for governments to have clearly defined policies with regard to when classified information should be declassified. Several instances were cited of vital information contained in classified documents getting lost or overlooked because:

(i) only a few copies of the documents were produced;
(ii) there was no decision as to when they should be declassified.

The result was that feasibility studies, surveys, recommendations by expert bodies and the like were sometimes duplicated at needless expense.

21. One participant suggested that due attention be given by appropriate national authorities to the provision of adequate reading material to the newly-literate to enable them acquire new knowledge and enhance their literacy.

Promoting the effective use of information

22. There was general agreement that user-education should be considered a vital element in national information policy and planning. It was noted that the working document had rightly placed considerable emphasis on this.

23. Participants stressed, however, that user-education had to be organized at different levels and must be adapted to the intellectual capabilities of various categories of users.

24. At the school level, consideration might be given to the possibility of incorporating relevant material on user-education into some traditional subjects in the curriculum.

25. Since user-education in schools had to rely primarily on the school teacher, the training of teachers or specialists in user-education was an issue of critical importance. It would be useful in this connection to produce instruction manuals on user-education for teachers.

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26. One participant suggested that, in the generation, handling and use of information, the respective obligations of the generator of information, intermediary personnel and the user might have to be spelt out so as to promote the effective transfer of information.

V. STATEMENT OF BASIC POLICY AND POLICY-MAKING PROCEDURES

27. Participants agreed that a statement of basic policy was only meaningful if it was liked to a pragmatic plan of action.

28. The importance of inter-sectoral coordination of information policies, plans and priorities was very much emphasized in the working document and this received the concurrence of participants. The experience of some countries, however, revealed that such co-ordination might have to contend with considerable resistance where strong sectoral interests, based on different conceptions of priorities, or where inertia existed.

29. The experience of one country showed that it was best for the coordinating authority to start from areas within its own fields of competence or constitutional mandate and then to attempt to persuade others to accept the idea that a coordinated plan or programme was in the interest of everybody.

30. The experience of another country showed that, as financial resources became more and more scarce, sectoral policies tended to give way to coordinated policies, which suggested that one of the strong arguments in support of coordination was the cutting down of costs. The experience of yet another country showed that even where funds did not present a problem, scarce manpower could become a serious constraint and make coordination an imperative necessity.

31. On the basis of the experience of a number of countries (which were recounted for the benefit of participants) it appeared that the initiative for the policy formulation and planning process often came from professionals. That is to say, in the initial or preparatory phase, it is the professionals who set the ball rolling. At the appropriate stage, the appropriate government authorities are approached and their endorsement solicited.

32. From the discussion also, it seemed that the creation of working groups or ad hoc committees which gave way to, or ended up as, permanent advisory or planning bodies appeared to be the most common pattern.

33. On the issue of centralization versus decentralization policies, participants agreed that certain types of operations or services could be centralized with advantage. Thus, for example, support services such as standardized systems design, working procedures and training could be centralized.

34. In the course of the debate it was explained that, in Unesco documents, the term "policy" was used in a broad sense and included plans and strategies. It was suggested, however, that it might be useful to make the planning component of the term "policy" in this broader usage explicit by speaking of "policy and planning". Some participants argued that the use of the term "policy" was not appropriate in many contexts since it was governments which

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took policy decisions. Furthermore, the term "policy" sometimes tended to suggest basic principles or assumptions on which a programme of action was based. It would, accordingly, be preferable to speak of "programmes" or "strategies" instead of "policies". A participant informed the meeting that the term "policy" had been defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as "a general plan of action", which suggested that the phrase "policies and plans" was appropriate. One participant further pointed out that the term "policy" was often used in a broad sense to include planning and strategies not only in Unesco documents, but in other contexts; e.g. we speak of "economic policy", "science policy", "fiscal policy" and so on. Accordingly, the term "policy" could be retained.

VI. IMPLEMENTING INFORMATION POLICY

35. It was agreed that there should be an introductory paragraph under this heading (p.16) emphasizing that the implementation of the national plan was the most important aspect of the whole process of national policy making and planning to meet the objectives of development goals.

36. One participant argued that it would not be appropriate to locate the coordinating body described in the working document in an institution with operational responsibilities (p.24, para.2) since this might tend to compromise the necessary detachment and objectivity required in taking decisions.

37. It was suggested that, in monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of information policies in relation to national development goals, it was essential to identify and define indicators which would enable the impact of information services on the different sectors of the socio-economic system to be assessed.

38. On the question of short-term and medium-term programmes, discussed in the working document (p.18, para.2), one participant expressed the opinion that, in general, a short-term programme was of little use unless it was conceived as a phase of a medium-term plan.

39. While participants agreed that plans had to be reviewed in the light of changing conditions, it was going too far to suggest that national information plans be reformulated every year since this might result in changing course midstream in respect of some programmes which might have good chances of achieving their specific objectives; and this could bring about needless disorganization of promising programmes.

40. The proposed Global Information Network in the Vienna Programme of Action was briefly discussed. Participants agreed that the success of the Global Network would depend, in large measure, on what was done at the national level. Such a network would only work if it inter-faced conveniently and effectively with national systems.

41. Some participants suggested that training programmes in the planning of information systems be instituted for suitably-qualified personnel. However, one participant drew attention to the fact that the teaching of information planning and management procedures was already being undertaken in most post-graduate courses in library and information science.

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42. One participant observed that many developing countries had little experience in the assessment of the effectiveness of information policies and plans. He was of the view that outside expert advice from the UN system would be useful. It appeared to him, however, that there was not a large enough cadre of experts in the UN system in relation to demand with the result that the process of recruiting experts tended to be unduly protracted.

43. In the discussion of this subject, a participant pointed out that once Unesco had agreed in principle to supply an outside expert, the recipient country could take the initiative in identifying a suitable expert who would be acceptable to Unesco. This could help in reducing the long waiting period required for recruiting an expert.

44. From the discussion, it appeared that UN experts were not particularly patronized by developed countries. The situation appeared to be different in many developing countries. One participant from a developing country, however, observed that visiting experts were sometimes useful not because of any superior expertise which might not be available locally, but because the relevant local authorities often accepted proposals by outside experts more readily. Instances were cited of proposals or recommendations made by local professionals which had been set aside or ignored but which had subsequently been accepted on being put forward by visiting experts. There was a tendency to regard proposals by outside experts as being more authoritative or, perhaps, unbiased.

45. In conclusion, it was agreed that the views expressed at the meeting be brought to the attention of the appropriate Unesco authorities. Participants further adopted a resolution expressing appreciation for the good work done in the preparation of the working document and recommended that a Committee (about 2 or 3 selected participants) be invited by Unesco/PGI to assist in putting it into final form for early publication.

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